

Homeless Shelter Workers in Midwestern Urban Centers

Archie Green Fellows Project AFC2016034

Oral History of Kate Coleman,

Outreach Worker in the Minneapolis Central Library employed by St. Stephen's Human Services

Minneapolis, Minnesota on January 23, 2017

Summary of Interview

Kathryn (Kate) Coleman works as an Outreach Worker to patrons of the Minneapolis Downtown Library (part of Hennepin County Libraries) where she connects with people experiencing homelessness. The Minneapolis Central Library is located at 300 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis, MN 55401.

This interview took place in a meeting room at that library.

Interview Log

- | | |
|----------|--|
| 00:00:01 | Introduction |
| 00:00:19 | Job title Library Outreach Coordinator, employed by St. Stephen's Human Services, but also contracts with Hennepin County's Health and Human Services Department and member of their Homeless Access team; is hosted by the library; |
| 00:01:09 | How Kate came to this work; had always worked in social services; studied sign language; while at St. Catherine's University (St. Paul) through Professor D'ann Lesch's course "The Global Search for Justice" volunteered with St. Stephen's Street Outreach; was eventually hired as an Outreach Housing Worker; |
| 00:04:06 | Discussion of how outreach became part of the library; street outreach workers look for people on the streets, camping out, and connects them to Kate as a housing worker; helped people who'd been long-term homeless adjust to having a home again; worked with landlords; the library had many people asking librarians for resources such as how to get into shelter, how to get county benefits, where to go for a meal; wanted to fill the gap in information, started a Patrons Experiencing Homelessness Work Group; received funding for a full-time outreach worker in the library and hired Kate; |
| 00:07:42 | Funding for position is from the Partners Fund, Hennepin County Office to End Homelessness, Minneapolis Downtown Council; Kate has been in this position just over one year; |
| 00:08:13 | Description of activities; <ul style="list-style-type: none">• weekly drop-in hours; announced via library's P.A. system and messages sent to all public-use computers in the library; one-on-one meetings with people needing help with homelessness; some need shelter, some may be living in a vehicle, some may wish to return to work; |

- roams library and engages people; needs may be as basic as obtaining an identification card;
 - addresses issues/barriers that the individual identifies, but often there are other issues to address as well;
 - models her approach on the library's approach: offer information and resources, but if the individual just wants to read, don't force services on them; this is unlike traditional street outreach which is more intent on connecting people with housing;
- 00:12:19 Clarification about alerts on public computers;
- 00:12:49 Why people experiencing homelessness are frequent visitors; urban location, five shelters within two miles of library [clarification: correct number is seven: five for adults without children and two for families]; very few public places downtown where someone can be for any length of time; some people come because it's quiet and safe; others because they can use computers to find housing, employment;
- 00:15:02 Discussion of other places someone can be in public; drop-in centers, community centers: warm places are listed in cold weather, but they're often malls, movie theaters requiring money, not able to be carrying bags; skyways are available if you keep moving; Peace House is an option, but most for most people, homelessness is not a dominant way they describe their lives, so they prefer not to spend a lot of time at homeless-specific places; the library is a more "normal", community location;
- 00:17:35 Discussion of why people lack housing; systemic problems such as housing inequality; people in poverty and of color more likely to be evicted unfairly, have less access to legal recourse; people with felonies; story of an older lady who shoplifts for food; people living in crises of multiple small barriers; people released from corrections to the community where no one will rent to them; Kate cites Wilder Foundation Homeless Survey about prevalence of traumatic childhood experiences among homeless adults; discussion of mental illness, impact of trauma; lack of homeless prevention support; "survival crimes" such as trading sex for a place to stay;
- 00:23:45 More details about making contact with people: limited drop-in hours; note that Kate also attends meetings and needs to stay up on resources; she is the only person in her role; referrals by librarians and security about people in need; story about security alerting her to someone in need;
- 00:27:24 Additional activities: documents case notes and researching resources; in 2016 worked with about 550 individuals; about half are ongoing and the other half she sees once or twice; many social service or healthcare care coordinators visit library to see people but they don't often connect with one another, so Kate can make those connections; story about a woman Kate was able to locate for other providers;
- 00:30:48 Discussion of importance of computers for people experiencing homelessness; looking for resources, having email correspondence; connecting on social media;
- 00:31:43 note about Kate's office on-site;
- 00:32:47 Discussion about new HUD-required systems, HMIS (Homeless Management Information System) and Coordinated Entry, and data collection; documentation and evaluation will help us work more systemically; the need to demonstrate importance of our work to others; database used by St. Stephen's Human Services is ClientTrack; Kate

also has access to Hennepin County databases to see things such as criminal history, benefits, some health information; discussion of five single adult shelters and different services provided at small or large shelters; Higher Ground of Catholic Charities, Salvation Army; evaluating people's need based on vulnerability to prioritize people who need more support; HMIS enables workers like Kate to see if someone has already had certain assessments, is working with someone already and so on; coordinated entry has been used for about six months so far; discussion of systems;

- 00:41:53 Discussion of challenges; areas where she can't assist people (such as, rental vacancy at 2% means less incentive for landlords to take Section 8 vouchers; vouchers will expire if not used in 3 months); emotional balance to prevent burnout; concerns about recent political changes; difficulty working with young people; story about a mom and domestic abuse; story about a young man getting in touch with family; boundaries; describes her day as a flood of interactions, complicated situations, and insufficient resources;
- 00:50:26 Discussion of successes; getting someone an I.D.; story of someone who felt she was on a spiritual journey; getting someone to go to a hospital; getting people back into housing; much of her role is listening without judgment; story of connecting a man to adaptive technology; initially thought she'd do more case management, but her role doesn't have that capacity;
- 00:57:11 Other organizations she works with: Healthcare for the Homeless, which now offers mental health services; Front Door, Hennepin County's phone-in assessment; definition of a "warm hand-off" when one provider engaged with an individual makes a connection with another provider while staying engaged until that relationship is established; Veterans Outreach [with Veterans Administration], Hennepin County's Homeless Access Unit; StreetWorks [coordinated by Lutheran Social Services] which does youth outreach; Goodwill-Easter Seals works with people on SNAP ENT [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - Employment and Training Program] on finding employment; will begin to work/learn new Americans/refugee supports; Twin Cities Rise, Catholic Charities, many others;
- 01:01:55 Discussion of whether a position like hers had existed in prior generations; housing crisis wasn't like this in the 1970s; positive developments like understanding post-traumatic stress disorder, stopping mental illness stigma, have changed things; discussion of cultural/economic biases around mental health; discussion of heroin epidemic, opioid prescriptions and abuse;
- 01:05:03 Discussion of the future of her position; how we define "homelessness"; some communities have ended certain types of homelessness; belief in a tidal change where we fully end homelessness; may take generations to fix entrenched homelessness;
- 01:08:14 Discussion of her skill set and how they would transfer to other work; expects to always work with people;
- 01:11:56 Advice for people beginning her sort of work; learn target population, what services you can provide, how involved do you get; define what problems you can help solve because people will bring all kinds of problems; working with broken systems; the temptation to

want to do it all; prioritize; take time to evaluate and plan rather than go from crisis to crisis; story about library's new Americans center and working with colleagues to create effective programs;

01:16:08 Discussion of how her work has changed her; prior work enabled her to see improvements, even slowly; this work is constant person after person; more guilt about her life and access to what she needs; job can be overwhelming; not usually involved long enough to see successes; job successes include decreased tension between homeless patrons and library staff; her involvement in systems change; her change in perspective about "hard-knocks"; the impact of becoming a mother while doing this work;

01:22:30 End